RPG Reload File 051 – 'Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness 3'

August 13, 2015 by Shaun Musgrave

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we use our MP every turn. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the misty old days of the App Store to see how it's doing in the here and now. It's a chance to play some old favorites, take a look at their place in the overall scheme of things, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. As the party leader, I try to choose a balanced plate of RPGs from week to week, but if you feel like I'm missing something awesome, I'm always happy to take suggestions. You can do that by commenting below, posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread in the forums, or by tweeting me at @RPGReload.

This week we're looking at a game that's almost as remarkable for the circumstances of its development and release as it is for the game itself. For iOS-exclusive gamers, it's also a very curious case of circumstances adding up to only the third chapter out of four being released on the platform. *Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness 3* ($2.99) (hereafter referred to as *Penny Arcade Adventures 3*) was originally going to be a 3D RPG for consoles and PC with a customizable main character, just like the first two chapters were. Then, it was just a written story. Finally, it ended up as a 16-bit style throwback with fixed characters, released on mobile, PC, and Xbox 360. In total, the *Penny Arcade Adventures* ended up spanning

five years, two developers, two engines, and several platforms. Only two of those platforms would end up hosting all four chapters, however, and iOS is unfortunately not one of the lucky two.

Hopefully, *Penny Arcade* itself needs little introduction. I'd like to get home in time for supper tonight. A game-based webcomic started in 1998 by two friends, it is perhaps the earliest and certainly most successful strip based on the now-tired concept of two dudes sitting on a couch and cracking wise about video games. The art was a bit shaky in the beginning, and the words a little clumsy, but the humor was spot-on and it didn't take long for the duo to refine their respective crafts. Through the success of the comic, *Penny Arcade* grew quickly, and eventually launched several projects, including what is now the biggest fan expo in gaming, PAX, and one of the bigger gaming-related charities, Child's Play. That was all possible thanks to the quality of the strip itself and the business savvy of business director Robert Khoo.

Not every venture has been as successful as PAX and Child's Play, however, and I think it's fairly safe to say that *Penny Arcade Adventures*, the very first

Penny Arcade video game, is one of those mixed results. Officially announced in August of 2006, *Penny Arcade Adventures: On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness* was set to be developed by then-newcomers Hothead Games. Based on a story written by Jerry Holkins and with art design by Mike Krahulik, it was a role-playing game that promised to put the player in the game world, fighting alongside *Penny Arcade*'s main characters, Tycho Brahe and John "Gabe" Gabriel. In its several years of existence, the comic had certainly built up enough homegrown lore and humor to support such a game. Fans were excited, and detractors were hungry to see the critics become the criticized. Both camps would have to wait a little while, and I'm not sure if either group got exactly what they wanted.

The first episode released in May of 2008, and would eventually see release on Windows, Linux, Mac, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3. Neither a great game nor a bad one, it did more or less what it was promised to do. Fans could enjoy going on an adventure and interacting with their favorite characters from the strip, while non-fans could enjoy a decent if not terribly exciting bite-sized RPG. The second chapter soon followed, hitting in October of the

same year. It would eventually release on the same platforms as the first chapter, which is a good thing and something you would expect a series to do where it's reasonably possible. As one would expect from an episodic series, this second game essentially just continued the story of the first with few changes to the mechanics. The third episode was *supposed* to hit the following spring, and this is where things get interesting.

Spring and indeed all of 2009 came and went. Hothead Games had released *Deathspank* during that time, but there was no word on the third chapter of *Penny Arcade Adventures* apart from an [interview early in 2009 with Gamasutra](#) where the developers mentioned the second episode had sold 25% of what the first had while nevertheless committing to seeing it through. The news finally came at the start of PAX East in March 2010. Mike Krahulik himself confirmed to Joystiq in an interview that there would be no third episode of the game coming. Hothead felt they would do better focusing on *Deathspank*, and nobody involved wanted the *Penny Arcade* games to be anything but a full effort. Instead, Holkins and Krahulik promised to finish the story in a more traditional form through the main website so that fans wouldn't be left hanging.

The universe wasn't done playing with *Penny Arcade Adventures*, however. Those written chapters did indeed go up on the website in prose form, but the games weren't quite as dead as they appeared. At PAX in August of 2011, Zeboyd Games announced that they would be picking up the *Penny Arcade Adventures* series and finishing the last two episodes in their signature style. Zeboyd Games was best-known at the time for their cult hit *Cthulhu Saves The World* [($1.99)](), and you can read more on them in [the RPG Reload dedicated to that game](). I can't speak for anyone else, but I was pretty excited about this. I had found Hothead's take to be good fanservice but pretty boring as RPGs, but I trusted Zeboyd to work their usual RPG magic. From a gameplay point of view, it's a pretty jarring shift, especially since the player-created character needed to be ditched, but it all worked out okay. *Penny Arcade Adventures 3* released in August of 2012, nearly four years after the second episode. Zeboyd aimed as wide as they could in terms of supported platforms, releasing the game on Windows, Xbox 360, Mac, iOS, and Android. Sadly, PlayStation 3 got left out of the party for the remaining installments, but it wouldn't be alone for long.

Sales on some of the platforms must have been pretty weak, because although the fourth episode eventually came in 2013, it only released on Windows and Xbox 360. In addition to finishing off the story, *Penny Arcade Adventures 4* introduced monster-battling mechanics and features some of Zeboyd's best design to date. Sadly, I don't think I'll ever have occasion to give it the proper blow-out in this feature, as *Penny Arcade Adventures 3* looks to be the last Zeboyd game on mobiles for at least the foreseeable future. Small developers have to choose their battles carefully, friends. If you're interested in checking the game out, it's available on Steam for a very low price, and it will run on just about any PC. I know this because it runs on my terrible laptop. But if you don't want to do that, I think it's still okay to just play *Penny Arcade Adventures 3*. You'll still get a fairly satisfying story, and the mechanics stand just fine on their own.

To be honest, I think you're better off not getting too invested in the overarching story of *Penny Arcade Adventures*. Not only is it difficult to get all of the chapters in one place, the main narrative feels like it's clashing with the tone of the games on the whole. Holkins has a way with words, and if you're into a particular sort of story, he's very good with it, but I generally appreciate his snappy dialogue and sense of comedic timing more than his bigger, more serious plots. *Penny Arcade Adventures 3* features both, however, and that's a real turn-off for me. Tycho Brahe serves both as a comedy character and a man with a twisted plan, and it's pretty hard to reconcile the two at times. The story ends up going to interesting places, but I'm not sure how well I like it. Luckily, if you're like me, you can just ignore it all and enjoy the banter and witty prose that comes from a comedic high five like *Penny Arcade* and Zeboyd joining forces.

That end of things works very well. It's a genuinely funny game, with lots of great conversations that build off of the well-known dynamic between Tycho and Gabe. As usual for Zeboyd, you'll want to target and read the descriptions of every monster you run into, because they all have something interesting to say. The game is a bit mean-spirited in how it treats homeless

people, but I suppose you can't make a comedy omelet without breaking a few eggs. *Penny Arcade* readers should be right at home with the comedy on the whole, and there are plenty of references for fans to pick up on. Being a regular reader of the strip myself, I can't say for sure how the game would read to a non-fan, but I suspect it would still be a good, if not quite as rich, experience.

Even if you aren't a *Penny Arcade* fan, however, you can certainly enjoy the gameplay. What I really like about Zeboyd Games is that they are huge fans of JRPGs that rethink everything we take for granted in JRPGs. In their previous games, they focused on doing away with needless random encounters, pointless fights, and skill/item hoarding. It's clearly an on-going project, because in *Penny Arcade Adventures 3*, they take things even farther. Random encounters are gone altogether (well, almost), replaced by visible encounters with preset groups of enemies. They use their usual cattle prod of having the enemies get stronger with each passing turn in battle, but encourage you even more by having MP be a resource that doesn't carry over from battle to battle. Instead, you build up points with each turn, losing them all at the end of the battle.

The message is clear: use your skills, stupid. That said, there's still value in the vanilla fight command, since it doesn't consume any MP, allowing you to stockpile it for stronger attacks within that battle. A similar approach is taken with consumable items. Things like potions or grenades are no longer consumable in the traditional sense. Instead, you get a certain number of uses in each battle, a number that can be increased by collecting or buying certain items. It's pretty neat, because even in *Cthulhu Saves The World*, I found myself reluctant to use my items, but here, I can launch them off whenever they're needed, worry-free.
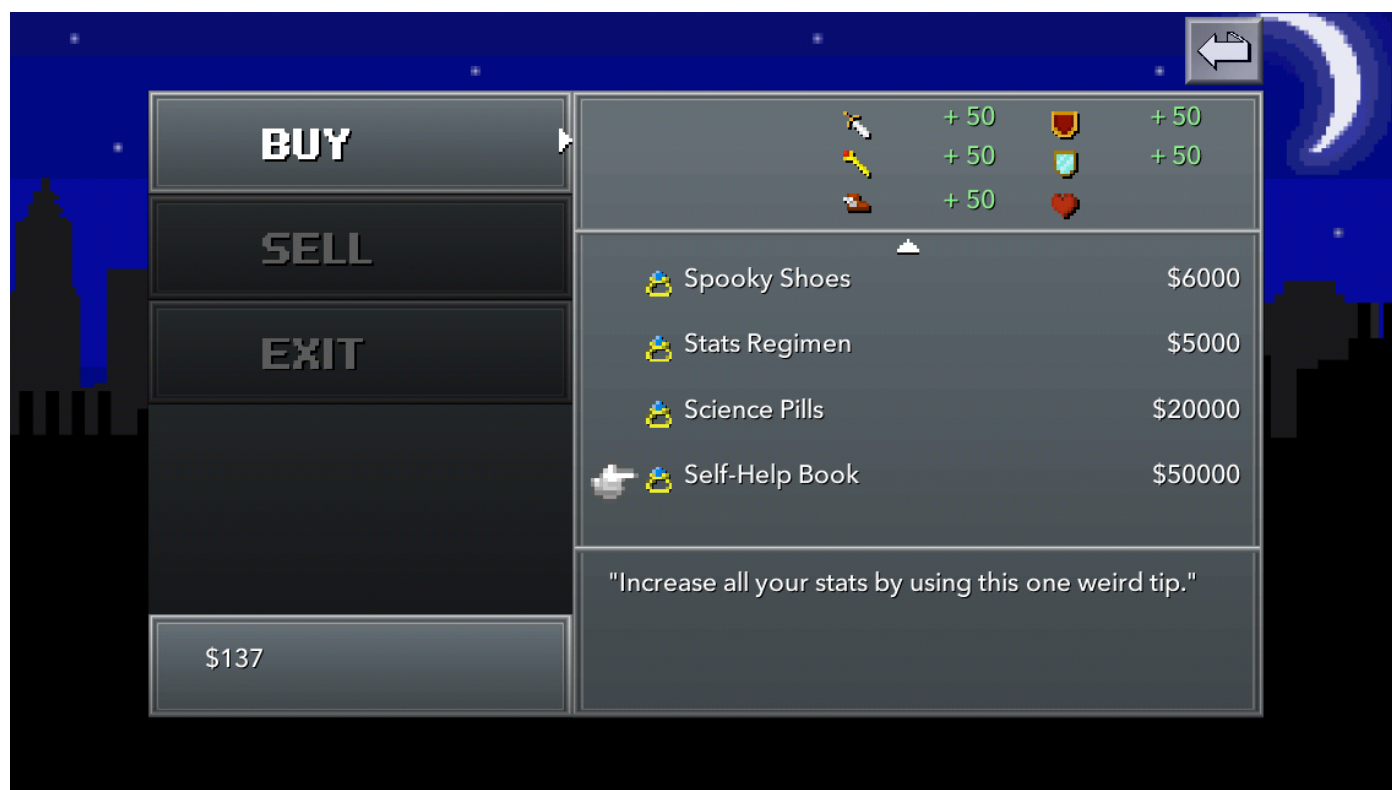
Although the combat system is turn-based, it seems to pick up cues from games like *Grandia*. A line at the top of the screen shows the order everyone will take their move in, and faster characters will move along that line more quickly than others. Many attacks and skills allow you to interrupt, pushing an enemy's move back farther on the line. This is a key part of the strategy in tougher fights, and if you set things up just right, many enemies won't even be able to take more than a swing or two at you during the fight. At the same time, the enemies get stronger with each turn, so if you don't resolve things quickly, it's easy for things to get out of hand. Losing a battle doesn't do

anything but kick you out to the map and let you try again, however, so the penalty isn't very harsh for experimenting.

That's a good thing, because you'll be wanting to experiment. *Penny Arcade Adventures* includes a pretty wild job system, allowing characters to equip up to three jobs at a time, with full access to all of the skills of each. While each of your characters starts with a job, you'll unlock several more in two batches during the course of the game. You all know I love job systems, friends, but what you may not know is that I really love job systems with unconventional jobs, and wow, does this game fit the bill. Take, for example, the Gentleman. Thanks to its chivalrous nature, it's probably the best healer of the bunch, but it can also deliver sharp attacks with its cane. The Dinosorcerer can transform into a variety of dinosaurs, while the Delusionist has a bunch of weird moves that hurt the enemy only slightly more than they hurt the Delusionist itself. Only a small number seem to be reskins of traditional RPG roles. It's a lot of fun trying to piece together unfamiliar roles into a well-functioning party.
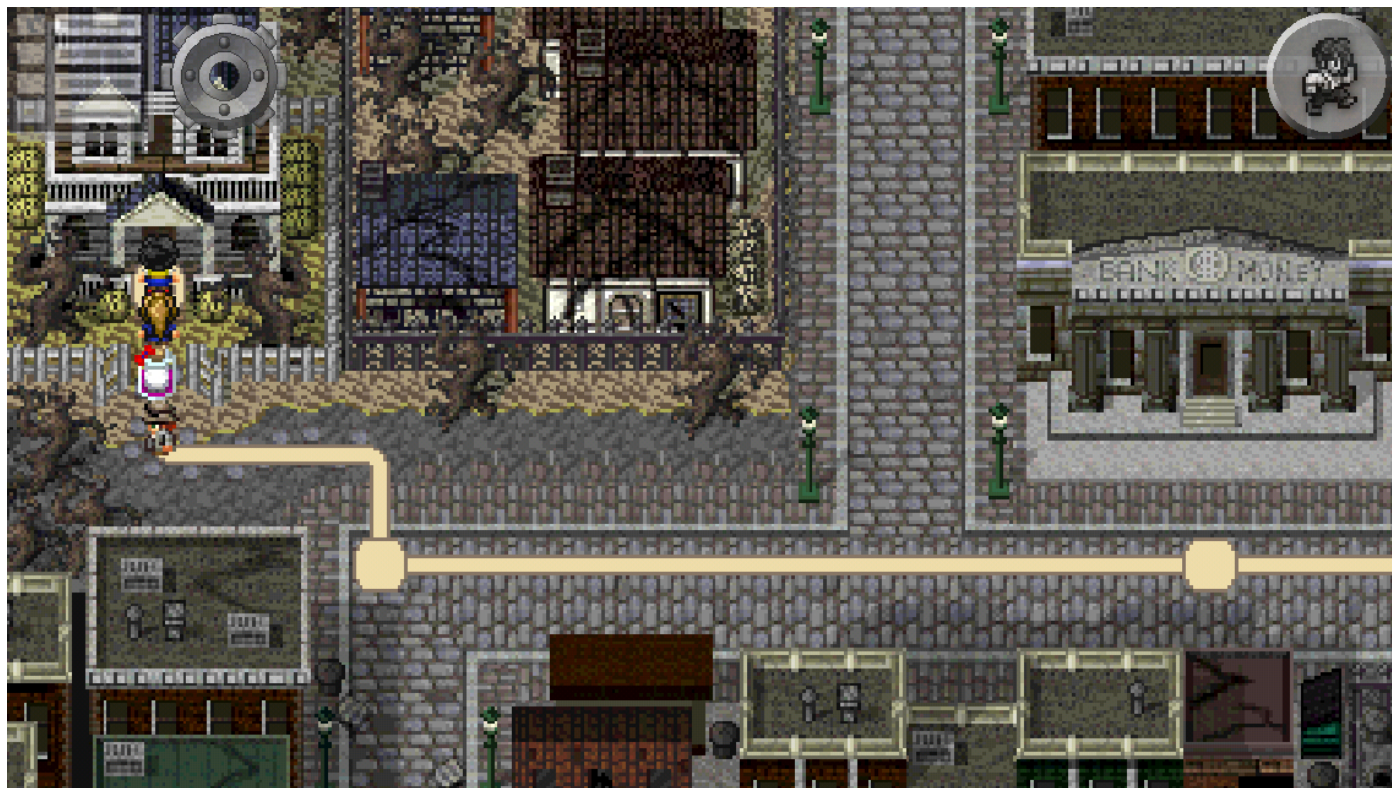
The exploration side of the game doesn't fare quite as well. The maps here

are smaller and a lot more straight-forward than they were in *Cthulhu*. That saves on getting lost, but it also means there's not much joy to be had in poking around. Finding treasure chests is less a matter of hunting carefully and more a matter of beating whatever enemy is in the way. The overworld is also completely (well, almost) streamlined, consisting of a series of points on a map. It's certainly easier to play, but at the expense of the little joys that come from finding secret things off the beaten path. It makes the game feel more gamey and less like an adventure, which has its good and bad points.

About halfway through the game, there's a great breath of fresh air that surprisingly comes from returning to the old and potentially stale. During your dimension-hopping, you end up in a world that seems very familiar. It's an 8-bit style fantasy RPG world, and you find yourself sent on a quest by a king whose castle looks like something out of *Dragon Quest* ($2.99). When you exit the castle, you end up on an overworld map where you can roam as freely as those kinds of games ever allowed you to. You'll also run into "random" encounters here, which are really just invisible preset battles that won't reoccur after you've hit them once. It comes at just the right time in the game, and goes on long enough to serve as a nice contrast to the game's regular mechanics. After that section of the game, we get to take a swing into a less-visited setting to indulge some sci-fi shenanigans before returning to the regular setting. They're fairly long side-trips in a fairly short game, but they serve to keep the game fresh just as you're probably getting a bit too comfortable with the combat mechanics and jobs.

The story ends on something of a cliffhanger, but you can always read up to find out what happens if you're interested enough to want to know but not interested enough to track down a PC to play the fourth game on. Like all of Zeboyd's games, it doesn't overstay its welcome, ending after about six or so hours. There are two different endings to find, and while the bad ending is pretty easy to achieve, the good ending will require you to demonstrate a reasonable mastery of the game's combat system. After you've finished the main game, or before if you want, you can play the extra content that was added in the iOS version of the game's single update. It bridges the end of episode two with the start of episode three, and explains what happened to the player's character from the Hothead installments. I'd advise tackling it after you've finished the main game, however, since it does spoil a few things.

I really like how the game plays with its visual style throughout. The 8-bit fantasy part looks like it fell out of *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy* ($7.99), with its combat scenes in particular patterned after the latter. The sci-fi part gives your characters *Star Trek*-style uniforms, and at one point early in the game, Gabe decides he wants to wear a red cape, which is reflected on his

sprite. If that's not enough tinkering around with sprite-based assets, the game allows you the option of switching the look of your main characters. You can gender-flip them, turn them into anthropomorphic animals, or change them into zombies. The character portraits and other art will reflect your choices, which is a fair bit of work for an optional feature. I played most of the game gender-flipped this time, which made the interactions between Tycho and Moira particularly fun.
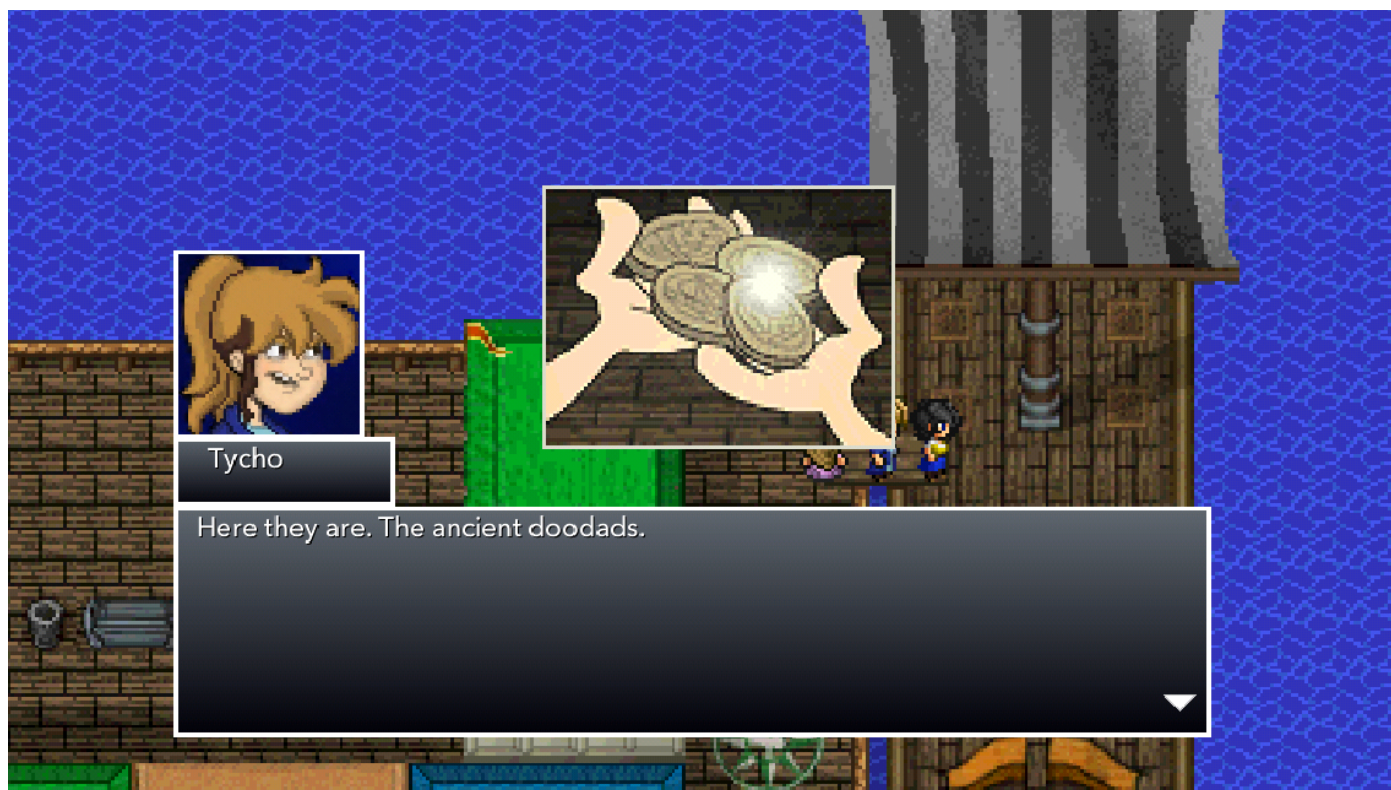
Besides not having the fourth game around to finish things up, my main complaint with *Penny Arcade Adventures 3* is in the controls. You can switch between a fixed pad or a floating one, which is good, but they're both useful in some situations and dreadful in others. You're going to end up cursing now and then no matter which one you pick. It's not like you can't live with it, but it's still annoying and there's virtually no chance the app will ever be updated again to fix them. The game's poor performance on mobile has basically left this and *Cthulhu* to their own devices. Fortunately, the games were made in such a way that they're very unlikely to break without drastic changes to iOS, but it's still kind of a bummer things didn't work out differently for Zeboyd's iOS efforts.

If you're a *Penny Arcade* fan, *Penny Arcade Adventures 3* is an easy recommendation, and as licensed fare goes, it's far better than it has any right to be. For non-fans, it's a bit more difficult, I think. If you love digging into complex mechanics and getting the most out of them by experimenting, you'll find plenty to chew on here. If, on the other hand, you're into this genre for the stories, well, I can't lie. You're getting one chapter out of four here, and while you could probably wing it if you had the ending, you're not going to get it on mobile. Still, I have to applaud Zeboyd for picking up the series and finishing it off, and I'm happy to just get a funny, interesting RPG out of the deal. *Penny Arcade*'s particular brand of humor is different from just about any other jokey RPG on iOS, and the Zeboyd layer of goofiness on top of it certainly doesn't hurt. Plus, I'm liable to give top marks to any RPG that lets me turn into a T-Rex. Just putting that out there.

That's just my take on *Penny Arcade Adventures 3*, though. What do you all think? Please share your thoughts in the comments below, by posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](). You can also send in questions for me and Eric Ford to answer on the podcast, if you'd like. Those should be sent to [rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com](), and if

they have pictures of cool dinosaurs attached, they just might get priority. As for me, I'll be back next week with... *oh*. Oh, it's time for *that* publisher, is it? Well, okay. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *RPG Fantasy Chronicle* [($6.99)](#)